



Saint Basil the Great

Basil is the brother of St. Gregory of Nyssa and of St. Macrina, and son of St. Emmelia. Basil was born around 329, during the reign of Constantine. He was a fellow student in Athens with St. Gregory the Theologian and Emperor Julian the Apostate. They were all baptized together with their instructor Evulios in the Jordan. Basil had a sharp mind and many of his writings have survived: on theology, apologetics, aesceticism and the canons. He vehemently defended the faith. He was Archbishop of Cappadocia. The Liturgy that bears his name is 10 times in the year: January 1, Eves of Christmas & Theophany, Sundays in Great Lent, Thursday and Saturday in Great Week. St. Basil reposed in the Lord, peacefully on January 1st, 379.

Earlier Life.

Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia; b. at Caesarea, of a wealthy and pious family, c. 330; d. there Jan. 1, 379. He was somewhat younger than his friend, Gregory Nazianzen, and several years older than his brother, Gregory of Nyssa, who, with him, are known as the three great Cappadocians. The first years of his life Basil spent on a rural family estate under the guidance of his grandmother, Macrina (q.v.), whom he always remembered with gratitude. He received his literary education at first in Caesarea, then at Constantinople, finally at the great school in Athens, where he became intimate with Gregory and the future emperor Julian. The practical ideal of pure Christianity, the elevation of the soul above sensuality, the flight from the world, and the subjection of the body were already apparent in him. The family tendency to an ascetic life proved decisive after his return to Caesarea (c. 357). For a time, indeed, he acted as rhetor, but he resisted exhortations to devote himself to the education of youth. At this time he seems to have received baptism, and, after being received into the Church, he

visited the famous ascetics in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. To the dogmatic controversies which stirred the Church he paid no attention, though he deplored them. Upon his return to Caesarea he distributed his property among the poor and withdrew to a lonely romantic district, attracting like-minded friends to a monkish life, in which prayer, meditation, and study alternated with agriculture. Eustathius of Sebaste (q.v.) had already labored in Pontus in behalf of the ascetic life and Basil revered him on that account, although the dogmatic differences, which then estranged so many hearts, gradually separated these two men also. Siding from the beginning and at the Council of Constantinople in 360, with the Homoiousians, Basil went especially with those who overcame the aversion to the homoousios in common opposition to Arianism, thus drawing nearer to Athanasius (see ARIANISM). He also became a stranger to his bishop, Dianius of Caesarea, who had subscribed the Nicene form of agreement, and became reconciled to him only when the latter was about to die.

Presbyter and Bishop of Caesarea.

In 364 Basil was made a presbyter of the Church at Caesarea and as such opposed the new bishop Eusebius, who was not favorably disposed toward asceticism. For a time he again withdrew to solitude, but the increasing influence of Arianism induced him to devote his undivided strength to ecclesiastical affairs. He now appears as the real leader of the Church of Caesarea, and in directing the church discipline, in promoting monachism and ecclesiastical asceticism, and especially by his powerful preaching, his influence grew. His successful exertions during the famine in the year 368 are especially praised. After the death of Eusebius (370), Basil was elected bishop of Caesarea in spite of much opposition on dogmatic and personal grounds; even his friend Gregory felt offended. Occupying one of the most important episcopal sees of the East, Basil's influence on public affairs was now great. With all his might he resisted the emperor Valens, who strove to introduce Arianism, and impressed the emperor so strongly that, although inclined to banish the intractable bishop, he left him unmolested. To save the Church from Arianism Basil entered into connections with the West, and with the help of Athanasius, he tried to overcome its distrustful attitude toward the Homoiousians. The difficulties had been enhanced by bringing in the question as to the essence of the Holy Spirit. Although Basil advocated objectively the consubstantiality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son, he belonged to those, who, faithful to Eastern tradition, would not allow the predicate homoousios to the former; for this he was reproached as early as 371 by the Orthodox zealots among the monks, and Athanasius defended him. His relations also with Eustathius were maintained in spite of dogmatic differences and caused suspicion (see EUSTATHIUS OF SEBASTE). On the other hand, Basil was grievously offended by the extreme adherents of Homoousianism, who seemed to him to be reviving the Sabellian heresy. The end of the unhappy factional disturbances and the complete success of his continued exertions in behalf of Rome and the East, he did not live to see. He suffered from liver complaint and excessive asceticism made him old before his time and hastened his early death. A lasting monument of his episcopal care for the poor was the great institute before the gates of Caesarea, which was used as poorhouse, hospital, and hospice.

Writings.

Of Basil's writings, mention may be made (1) of the dogmatic-polemical, including the books against Eunomius of Cyzicus (q.v.) entitled "Refutation of the Apology of the Impious Eunomius," written in 363 or 364; book i controverts Arianism, books ii and iii defend the Homoousianism of the Son and the Spirit. The fourth and fifth books do not belong to Basil, or to Apollinaris of Laodicea (q.v.), but probably to Didymus of Alexandria (q.v.). The work "On the Holy Spirit" (ed. C. F. H. Johnston, Oxford, 1892; transl. by G. Lewis, Christian Classics

Series, iv, London, 1888) also treats the questions of Homoousianism. Basil influenced the fixing of the terminology of the church-doctrine of the Trinity, though as concerns dogmatic acuteness and speculative power he is far behind Athanasius and his brother Gregory (of Nyssa). (2) The ascetic works (ascetica) are religio-ethical writings which acquaint us with the man who in a high degree labored for the naturalization of monasticism in the Church, and who at the same time exerted himself to regulate it in the cenobitic form and to make it fruitful also for the religious life of the cities (cf. A. Kranich, Die Ascetik in ihrer dogmatischen Grundlage bei Basilius dem Grossen, Paderborn, 1896). Of the monastic rules traced to Basil, the shorter is the one most probably his work (see BASILIANS). (3) Among the numerous homilies and orations, highly appreciated by the early Church, some like that against usury and that on the famine in 368, are valuable for the history of morals; others illustrate the worship of martyrs and relics; the address to young men on the study of classical literature shows that Basil was lastingly influenced by his own education, which taught him to appreciate the propaedeutic importance of the classics. His homilies on the Hexaemeron were especially valued. (4) The very numerous epistles are an important source of contemporaneous church history. His three "Canonical Epistles" give a clear idea of his efforts in behalf of church discipline. (5) The liturgies bearing the name of Basil (ed. with transl. by J. N. W. B. Robertson, London, 1894), in their present form, are not his work, but they nevertheless preserve the true recollection of Basil's activity in this field in formularizing liturgical prayers and promoting church-song. (6) A fruit of Basil's studies with his friend Gregory in their monkish loneliness is, finally, the Philokalia, an anthology (florilegium) from the works of Origen (ed. J. A. Robinson, Cambridge, 1893). The best edition of Basil's works is that of J. Gamier and Prudence Maran (3 vols., Paris, 1721-30), reprinted in MPG, xxix-xxxii. The "Holy Spirit," homilies of the Hexaemeron, and letters are translated in NPNF, viii.